

Ernest M. Rodriguez

Civil rights activist Ernest Rodriguez was born in 1928 in the predominantly Mexican settlement in Bettendorf known as Holy City in Iowa. His father, Norberto Rodriguez, migrated from Mexico in 1910 at the age of seventeen and in 1919 he married Muggie Belva Adams, an African American woman from Alabama, they moved to Bettendorf, Iowa in 1923.



The Rodriguez family lived in Holy City's boxcars and "flats" from 1924 to 1937 when they moved to southwest Davenport. Ernest Rodriguez graduated from Davenport High School (now known as Davenport Central High School) in 1946 and served in the U.S. Army from 1951 to 1953 where he was stationed in El Paso, Texas. In 1955, he married Juanita Serrano Segobiano, who pursued the path of a homemaker and chief caretaker of their nine children.

Rodriguez worked with other Davenport activists to push forward a strong civil rights agenda beginning in the late 1950's and continuing throughout his life. During the 1960's he served on the Human Relations Commission where he successfully targeted the need for a paid, full-time director for the commission. He stressed the importance of improving police-community relations as well as the need for the Davenport Community School District to hire more minority teachers, including Spanish-speaking teachers.

Rodriguez became the director of the newly created Area Board for Migrants, where he was instrumental in lobbying the state legislature for the creation of the Spanish Speaking Peoples Commission, the forerunner of the Iowa Commission of Latino Affairs. He advocated for a better understanding of Latino rights in Iowa and across the country. During this same period of time, 60's and 70's he initiated two bilingual newspapers (El Reportero and Columnas) as well as educational radio and television programs that reached a wide audience. Additionally, Rodriguez assisted aggrieved Hispanics to file discrimination complaints with appropriate government agencies like the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. He developed an immigration assistance program which is currently sponsored by the Davenport Catholic Diocese.

In 1970 Rodriguez was appointed to the Iowa Advisory Committee to the U.S. Civil Rights Commission and was a member of a team that toured the State of Iowa to make on-site assessments of community race relations in a number of cities. Rodriguez worked as an Equal Employment Officer for the Rock Island Arsenal from 1975 until his retirement in 1990, after which he continued to serve on civil rights organizations including the Illinois Migrant Council and the Davenport Civil Rights Commission.

At 90, Rodriguez continues to do public speaking engagements at many Eastern Iowa civil rights rallies and writes eloquent newsletters and articles for a variety of organizations and news outlets.